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ABSTRACT

In a 1969 survey, it was noted that 3 out of 5 principals reported some form of active protest in their junior and senior high schools. Although rural schools were less likely to encounter student protest than were urban or suburban schools, 53% of all rural schools reported some kind of activism or protest. Causes for protest ranged from school rules to current political issues. Constructive student involvement in school and community affairs was the most frequently proposed solution. Suggestions for ways to involve students and suggestions for administrative handling of different forms of student protest are offered. (JH)

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STUDENT ACTIVISM - AN OVERVIEW

by

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Although student activism on college campuses makes newspaper headlines more frequently, the junior and senior high schools are experiencing some form of student protest at an increasing rate. A survey sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) revealed that three out of five principals report some form of active protest in their schools (1). Questionnaires were mailed to every fifteenth principal of junior or senior high schools or combination schools in the United States. Of the 1,026 responses, 606 reported some kind of activism or protest.

Percentages of Schools Reporting Student Activism

	Large (over 2,000)	Medium (801-2,000)	Small (800 or less)	All
Urban	74	62	60	67
Suburban	81	72	56	67
Rural	67	67	50	53

Junior high schools surveyed reported almost as many student protests as did senior high schools.

Percentages of Junior and Senior High Schools with Student Activism

	Junior High	Senior High
Urban	59	63
Suburban	61	69
Rural	48	53
All	56	59

Although rural schools are less likely than urban or suburban schools to encounter student activism, the percentage is indeed great enough to warrant particular consideration at this time.

The major stated cause for student unrest in the secondary school has been school rules, particularly those pertaining to dress and grooming. Protests in this regard were slightly more prevalent in rural and suburban areas than in city schools. Individual students were the major source of protest, although parents (individually and through organizations), teachers, the student council, and community groups have also complained about regulations on appearance of students.

Smoking rules and the cafeteria were the next most common targets for protest. Other issues frequently mentioned were assembly programs or choice of club speakers, censorship and regulation of student publications, and scheduling of sporting and social events. Additional topics mentioned occasionally were the need for new student organizations, demand for more voice in rule-making, condition of the school plant, inactivity of the student council, ROTC, motor vehicles, rising costs, open versus closed campus, loss of senior privileges, cheerleader elections, and lockers.

Rural schools have experienced very little activism centered on race relations, the Vietnam war, or the draft -- although these issues are frequently the subjects of protests in large and medium-sized high schools in suburban and urban areas. Other current issues which were occasionally the subject of protest include voting by 18-year-olds, centralized versus local school boards, welfare programs, the police, the church, and the peace movement.

Dissatisfaction with the instructional program was cause for protest in 45 percent of the schools surveyed, occurring in rural as well as urban and suburban areas.

Norman S. Green (2), Superintendent of Proviso Township High School in Illinois, suggests that educational personnel contribute to student unrest by (a) talking more than listening, (b) unconsciously imposing on students a value system that is alien to them, (c) overemphasizing rules and regulations, (d) looking at students as a group rather than as individuals, (e) categorizing students by ability or aptitude, and (f) conveying contempt for students displaying deviant behavior.

Actual situations of activism in secondary schools are reported and analyzed in the June 1969 issue of School Management magazine (3). Suggestions are offered for administrative handling of three types of active protest:

Sit-in. The sit-in is the most widely used disruptive tactic. The immediate concern of administrators should be not to get the school back to normal but to find out why the demonstrators are unhappy. The administrative procedure to be used is "negotiating." Demonstrators should be lightly punished if at all.

Boycott. The boycott is the surest way for students to get publicity for their grievances. Be ready to "wait it out." The willingness to wait until negotiations are completed or until the demonstration disbands from within is important to prevent potential violence and physical-force situations.

Violence. The first priority is to stop the violence and restore order. Then, get the facts about the incident out to the community.

Also reported in School Management are suggestions to public school administrators from college administrators who have experienced campus confrontations (4):

Get faculty support before you get hit.

Stay in close touch with students, too.

Be realistic -- anticipate problems.

Watch for patterns of protest. Certain actions produce certain types of responses which, in turn, produce other acts.

Don't get hung up on abuse. Student demands are frequently deliberately over-vulgarized and presented in a rude and over-aggressive manner.

Grant concessions when you can.

Don't sell your integrity. Do not agree to any illegal demands and do not present the dissenters' case to the board unless you believe in it.

Stand firm -- but not too firm -- on discipline. Do not over-react and make martyrs of the demonstrators.

Call the police -- as a last resort. Never agree never to call the police.

Develop a battle plan -- quietly. Knowledge that you are developing or have a plan of action is provocative.

Ashbaugh (5) presents nine approaches tested in actual conflict as operational guidelines for the school administrator.

Maintain lines of communication. A "control room" or communications nerve center has proved effective. Issue a fact sheet to mass media, demonstrators, and staff members.

Control influences; enforce attendance. Prevent professional agitators, non-students, and sensation-seeking journalists from coming into the school. Explain attendance requirements and penalties for non-attendance if classes are in session.

Talk with student leaders. Agree to discuss issues with leaders on the grounds that other demonstrators maintain order.

Consider third-party mediation. A prominent university faculty member or a local judge well-respected by the community is suggested as a mediator.

Identify students' demands. Require that demands be formalized in writing or verbally.

Respond to student demands. Staff response can be developed from the following questions: What are we doing now (pertaining to a given student demand)? What have we planned to do in the future? What will implementing this demand entail? What is our recommended course of action?

Hear all viewpoints. A panel composed of student leaders, school administrators, and board members is suggested to hear viewpoints of those involved, to clarify the issues, and to receive recommendations as to courses of action which will resolve the conflict.

Decide on a course of action. Do not respond too quickly and in an uninformed way unless it is absolutely necessary.

Institutionalize student participation. School personnel can create channels for student communication and participation and assure student involvement through evolutionary rather than revolutionary means.

The generally suggested solution to problems of student activism is greater student involvement. Thomson (6) feels that the school has a direct responsibility to assist the interested student in becoming actively involved in school and community affairs. His suggestions for involving students in constructive ways include:

1. Schedule special days with student-planned curriculum.
2. Include student members on committees dealing with policy, regulations, and curriculum.
3. Establish a student administrative committee to schedule classes.
4. Arrange for student contacts through the school with community working groups desiring volunteer workers.
5. Provide an open microphone at a scheduled time for student expression on political issues.
6. Schedule controversial speakers maintaining the principal of balance.
7. Schedule short courses based on student interest or student request.

A principal in West Virginia created an advisory committee composed of five black students, five white students, and three faculty advisors to meet weekly to discuss student behavior, discipline, dress and grooming, and other school regulations.

Bimonthly student-faculty forums were instituted at a Colorado high school for discussions of school problems. Results have included clarification of existing school policies and changes in the school schedule, lunch menus and procedures, and student council representation and responsibilities.

An Indiana school system has a committee with subcommittees for each educational level to study school concerns. The senior high school group representing four high schools is composed of 10 students, 4 parents, 4 teachers, and 1 high school principal.

Student task forces in Orange County, California, study forms of student activism and make recommendations to the administration on procedures to

apply before, during, and after different types of protest.

The California State Board of Education gives students a voice through its Student Advisory Board on Education. Examples of issues for which this group has appealed to the State Board are improved sex education programs, more accurate representation of minority groups in textbooks, and a better student-counselor ratio.

In the NASSP survey mentioned previously, many principals who had not encountered student activism offered constructive suggestions for handling student protest. This suggests that student protest can be anticipated and that causes can be eliminated and problem situations prevented by administrative development of ways to involve the student similar to those suggested above.

Although the reason for student protest may be a specific local situation, many protests across the country seek the same ends. Regardless of the cause, the methods of protest and administrative procedures to handle student activism are generalizable to Appalachian schools.* Administrative activity based on the experiences of others may well prevent major disturbances in this area.

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* This paper was originally prepared for a conference on Appalachia.

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